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ABSTRACT

Language has the power to structure and change thought and behavior, where there exists a belief in this positive power of language. Magic is curative because the language of magic has a powerful suggestive effect on the human mind familiar with the context in which this language is used. In psychotherapy, the special terminology is a vital part of therapy. The language of Transactional Analysis, for example, represents the belief, shared by patient and therapist, that destructive behavior can be identified and changed; therefore, this language assists in the modification of behavior. Therapy techniques developed for working with drug addicts also rely on special language which helps separate the addict from his destructive patterns of behavior and form a new self-image. Ineffective communication patterns can be identified by carefully listening to the words a person uses to describe his experiences and relationships. Grinder and Bandler's therapy involves a kind of meta-language which helps the patient recognize the way he views himself and his environment. (Author/AM)

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III. THE CURATIVE POWER OF LANGUAGE: A Patient-Therapist Shared Belief

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Before the modern scientific age, words were often considered to have a magical power. Since the language of magic such as oaths and incantations has become associated with primitive beliefs, its significance and ability to affect human minds have tended to be discounted. Aldous Huxley in "Words and Their Meanings", affirms that words do have a magical power in the way they affect the thinking, feeling, and action of those who use them. He calls this the "psychological magic of words" and states further that "Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us."

Bronislaw Malinowski writing on "The Language of Magic", goes even further than Huxley in establishing the proposition that "there is a very real basis to human belief in the mystic and binding power of words" which he considers to be true for all men from the most primitive communities to the most complex civilizations. The social order could not exist without this belief in the sacredness and inviolability of words and their permanent force in establishing human relationships. The power of words is expressed in oaths, legal contracts, and the formulas of sacraments necessary for the continued functioning of personal relations and legal and moral institutions which are a part of every society.

Malinowski also emphasizes the positive function of the language of magic in inspiring hope and confidence in the individual. The Trobriand Islanders that Malinowski studied have simple curative magic formulas relying on direct suggestion, such as this example of medical magic:

> It passes, it passes,
> The breaking pain in thy bones passes,
> The ulceration of thy skin passes,
> The big black evil of thy abdomen passes,
> It passes, it passes...

Malinowski draws a parallel between Trobriand sorcery and the beliefs of Christian Science: "the main root of which is that by affirming health, welfare,

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order and happiness generally, you produce them; and by denying them, by allowing evil thoughts to be rampant, you generate disease." Malinowski also quotes beauty advertisements and political oratory as examples of modern verbal magic which essentially consists of a statement that is untrue, but inspires people with the conviction that it must become true. The mere repetition of certain words is believed to produce the stated reality.

The language of magic is defined by Malinowski as "the institutionalized expression of human optimism." Freud defines this function of magic as the "omnipotence of thought" and looks for the roots of magical activity in the human tendency to daydream. Malinowski disagrees with Freud, stating rather that magic is a recognition of the impotence of thought and is only resorted to when experience has demonstrated man's powerlessness in a particular situation. This hopeful aspect of magic, Malinowski believes has an integrative influence on the individual mind.

The power of the incantations of Trobriand sorcerers comes from the knowledge of each member of the community of every spell that is performed. The public recitation of the magic words is the most important part of the ritual. The whole community participates in preperations for and carrying out of the magic spell. The natives believe that the magician is communicating with the object addressed which could be heaven, spirits, or plants; by this belief the words do really have an affect, not on the object addressed perhaps, but on the magician himself and all those who work with him. The function of verbal magic, according to Malinowski, is not to communicate ideas, but to radiate emotional influence on the psychology of each member of the community. These mystical words are a cultural phenomenon that have a wide range of associations and must be understood in the context of the whole social system.

The difficulty in translating magical words is recognized by Di Pietro (1977). The magical force of language was exemplified for him as a child growing

up in a family that used both Italian and English by his Grandmother's frequent exhortation "se Dio vuole!" (God be willing!) This expression reminded the rest of the family that a particular desire or a hoped for situation was not completely under human control and also served as a kind of psychological protection against the many disappointments of life. These words always seem to lose their magic in translation because the author associated them with a shared belief that only had this special force in an Italian cultural and social context.

The psychological magic of words and their curative power is at least tacitly recognized by many modern psychotherapeutic schools. Eric Berne, the originator of Transactional Analysis, has declared that the therapist should never say anything that an eight year old child could not understand. He criticizes the language of conventional psychotherapy because it "ordinarily employs three different dialects: therapist-therapist, therapist-patient, patient-patient, which are as different from each other as Mandarin and Cantonese" (Berne, 1972). Berne tries to establish a lingua franca of basic English which increses communication since both patient and therapist learn to use the same terms and expressions to describe the world they are experiencing.

Transactional Analysis is based on a theory of personality and social action which defines all the possible transactions between two or more people. Human social behavior is analyzed according to three specific ego states present in everyone: 1) the Parent, 2) the Adult, 3) the Child. Berne believes each person decides in early childhood how he will live his life and makes all his important decisions then. This life plan is called in T.A. terminology his "script." The main object of Transactional Analysis is for the therapist to help the patient recognize a losing script and abandon it so that he can start over with a winning script.

The therapist and patient both learn to use the special terminology of T.A. which helps the patient modify his behavior by revealing to him in a new light the motivations for his actions. This new language is a vital part of the

therapy and can be said to have a magic power because it represents a shared belief between patient and therapist that destructive behavior can be identified and changed--that in fact the patient can be cured.

One technique of T.A. is to get the patient to analyze his childhood relationships with his family to see what influenced him in forming his script. This is sometimes done by having the patient act out the part of the Parent or Child using the childhood nicknames he remembers. Therapists have found this to be an amazingly effective device that allows the patient to gain new insights and remember experiences and emotions that were otherwise forgotten. Malinowski observes in "The Language of Magic", men develop the conviction that the knowledge of the right name for a thing has a mystical power beyond mere communication of information that gives the user influence over the thing named.

Therapy techniques developed for working with drug addicts also rely on special language used to help separate the addict from his destructive patterns of behavior and form a new self-image (see Ames, 1976). The jargon of the world of addicts is replaced with a new language that forces the user to evaluate his behavior brutally, abandon all euphemisms that encourage his habit, and restructure his character and conduct in accord with the new language used to discuss himself and the world around him. Typically, ex-addicts in therapy groups are discouraged from swearing or using profanity. There is a Puritan streak in this approach which helps emphasize the difference between the addict's old world and his new reformed self. The language serves to establish its users as a community with the shared belief that the addict can change his behavior and be cured and in this context the special terminology becomes endowed with a power beyond its ability to communicate ideas.

John Grinder and Richard Bandler (1975, 1976), develop a grammar for therapy to which they refer as a language of growth. The authors believe that people have a most valued representation system for receiving and transmitting information about the world. The three major communication systems are defined as

auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. The therapist can help the patient by identifying his preferred system and enabling him to expand the portion of his representations which impoverish and limit him. For example, a person whose main input channel is auditory, might remark, "I hear what you're saying." A visually oriented person might say, "I see what you mean." A kinesthetic type might say, "I feel what you're saying. I'm in touch with what you mean." This can present serious difficulties in communication. For instance, one patient complained that when she put on a new dress for her husband to admire, he didn't notice her: "He just paws me and doesn't even look." The authors see this exchange as a typical misunderstanding between a visual type and a kinesthetic type which was overcome in this case by helping the woman to expand her kinesthetic representational sytem.

Ineffective communication patterns which lead to loss of choice in experience can be identified by carefully listening to the words a person uses to describe his experiences and relationships. Grinder and Bandler have developed a kind of meta-language for therapy which helps people to recognize the way they view themselves and their environment and expand their knowledge of both.

Thomas Kiernan (1974) reviews over sixty professional psychotherapeutic schools and methods and comes to the conclusion that "In the end, psychotherapy is a state of mind. If you are convinced it can help you, the likelihood is that it will; if you are convinced of the opposite, the likelihood is that it won't." A large part of this optimistic faith in the ability of therapy to cure is based on a belief shared by the patient and therapist in the positive power of language which can help structure and change the way we view ourselves and the world.

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